

## Take Me Back to the Night We Met by JackEPeace

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**Summary:**

In a lot of ways, he's exactly the same as Nancy remembers. It's been four years since she last saw him and in her mind, she always imagines him exactly that way, how he looked that night when he came by the apartment that had been theirs to get something he left behind and she'd been angry with him because he'd interrupted her studying and because she was focusing all her attention on being mad at him because it was easier than being sad about the fact that he was gone and the book was the only thing left of him in the apartment and she was alone and had to sleep with the lights on like she'd done as a girl back in Hawkins.

# Take Me Back to the Night We Met

## Author's Note:

I am obsessed with Nancy.

I love Nancy and Jonathan.

Title comes from the song "The Night We Met" by Lord Huron because I heard it and it made me want to write this story.

In a lot of ways, he's exactly the same as Nancy remembers. It's been four years since she last saw him and in her mind, she always imagines him exactly that way, how he looked that night when he came by the apartment that had been theirs to get something he left behind. A book, a college textbook, tossed carelessly under the couch. It had seemed both like an excuse and a completely innocent circumstance, something too Jonathan to be a fabrication. It had been the last semester of the last year of college and she'd been angry with him because he'd interrupted her studying and because she was focusing all her attention on being mad at him because it was easier than being sad about the fact that he was gone and the book was the only thing left of him in the apartment and she was alone and had to sleep with the lights on like she'd done as a girl back in Hawkins.

Nancy remembers that night easily as she stands in line, waiting for her coffee and bagel, the collar of her jacket turned up even though she's inside now and out of the freezing rain. She studies the small TV fixed to the wall above the counter of the deli and thinks again that Jonathan looks almost exactly as she always remembers him. How he looked then, when she had stood in the living room with her arms crossed over her chest, a scowl on her face, and one hip cocked to the side -the stance she had learned the year after Barb died and Will went missing and people at school believed that they, more than usual, knew something about her. Jonathan hadn't looked at her, poking through the apartment, through the things that had once been theirs together and that had made her angry too because she had wanted him to look at her, had wanted him to apologize -for what she didn't know- and say that maybe this thing wasn't over between

them after all. But he hadn't and she hadn't either, and he'd finally found the book under the couch and she had made some comment about him not having a single thought in his mind and then they had stared at each other for a moment -finally- with Jonathan already half out the door -one hand on the frame, one foot in the hallway- and she had tried to remember why he was leaving in the first place.

But he had left and she always remembers him in that moment: twenty-two and holding a photography textbook in his hand.

Nancy studies him now, this pixelated version of Jonathan on the TV on the deli wall and it's like looking at a ghost. She'd stepped in from the sleet, early to the meeting she'd rushed around all morning to get ready for, deciding that what she needed was a coffee and a breakfast she could pick at and there he had been. On the TV. Talking to a news reporter she recognizes from channel surfing in the evenings.

Nancy tries to remember the last thing she heard about Jonathan, whatever her mother had told her over one of their long-distance phone calls. Something about California and movies and how Joyce was very proud. Nancy remembers the conversation now, how she had hummed her way through it and imagined that twenty-two year old leaving the apartment and how it had sounded to hear the door click shut behind him for the last time.

"Yeah Mom," she had said as she wound the telephone cord around her finger, "I'll be sure to check it out."

Check what out? Some movie...something Jonathan had been involved in.

Clearly the movie that she can't remember a thing about has been successful. Or, at least, successful enough to earn him a spot on a TV show, being interviewed by a real newscaster, someone who has talked to famous actors and comedians.

On screen, Jonathan looks a little bit older, his hair just a little bit shorter. But his smile is still awkward and uncertain, his head tilted slightly downward, never quite looking at the camera or the woman sitting across from him.

Nancy can't help but smile, watching the interview without sound. He might look different -older and more polished- but he's still so much the Jonathan that she knew before.

She's still smiling when the man behind the counter calls out her order and she picks it up, wrapping her fingers around the coffee, trying not to look over her shoulder to catch the rest of the interview with Jonathan Byers.

Later, after her meeting, when she's back in her apartment again with a roommate she never sees and a cat that comes and goes through the open fire escape window, Nancy picks up the phone and dials home.

Holly answers and Nancy can picture her sister, this blonde teenager standing back in Hawkins in clothing that she swears is way cooler than anything Nancy ever wore when she was a teenager. And maybe she's right, what would Nancy know anyway?

"Mom's not here," Holly says after a few minutes of small-talk made awkward but the age difference between the two sisters, "she made Dad take her on a date."

Nancy smiles to herself. "She left you alone?"

Holly makes an offended sound and Nancy wonders if she ever sounded like that. "I'm thirteen years old."

Holly has never really known about Hawkins and what happened there when she was too young to really remember much of anything; has never really understood the short but intense period of time where their mother kept all her children close and on a tight leash because of the unexplainable things that happened there. Nancy figures enough time has passed to make even Karen loosen her grip enough. Or maybe it started when Nancy left, going away to college. And maybe it got easier when Mike followed a few years later, leaving Hawkins with Will and Eleven for less deadly adventures.

"Yeah, yeah," Nancy says playfully, watching as the cat hops in from the fire escape and crosses the counter before jumping to the floor. She starts to say goodbye to Holly and then pauses, considering. "Hey, you don't know anything about Jonathan, do you?"

"Jonathan Byers?" Holly says with the same sort of tone she always uses, like she's never heard the name before. Like she doesn't remember holidays spent with Jonathan at the table with them or taking pictures of the Wheeler family by the Christmas tree. "Like your Jonathan?"

Nancy bites the inside of her cheek and ignores the cat that winds around her ankles. "I mean, he's-

"You know he's like a famous director now," Holly interrupts. "You haven't seen his movie?" She scoffs, disappointed. "You're probably the only person in the world who hasn't seen it."

Nancy lifts her eyes. "Jonathan made a movie?"

When her mother had mentioned it last weekend, Nancy hadn't thought that he had been so involved as to call it *his* movie. But clearly Holly would think otherwise.

"It's totally cool," Holly tells her, "it's not scary though. I mean, I wasn't scared." She says this in the tone of someone who has had to defend themselves many times before.

Nancy stretches the phone cord taut and lets it go again. The cat looks up, both annoyed and interested in the sound. "Oh, I'll...check it out," she assures Holly.

And she does, the next day when she's free from work. She steps up to the ticket window and realizes that she doesn't even know what the movie is called, though when she looks over the cashier's head and studies the list of titles, it isn't hard to figure it out.

Nancy smiles, shaking her head. "A ticket to *The Monster Hunters* please."

She and Jonathan never really talked much about that year in Hawkins, the time between when Will disappeared and when all those things came back and they almost lost Will again. The nightmares she was familiar with, both his and hers that would startle them awake most nights. Sometimes it was an easy fix, the mumbling of a reassurance, the touch of a hand against chest or face.

Sometimes it wasn't so easy to chase the memories away and Nancy figures that she did so well in her classes because of the nights that she and Jonathan spent awake with the lights on in the apartment, studying or talking or making each other laugh out of exhaustion and the bubbly feeling of love that always seemed to catch her by surprise. Sometimes they would talk about Hawkins during those late nights, when it seemed safe enough to mention it in passing, in a "remember this?" sort of way that stemmed from the nightmares in their minds.

But, for the most part, they never talked about it. There was never any need. Now Nancy studies the title on the ticket stub in her hand, thinking about how it had felt to go into the hardware store and put the bear trap on the counter and imagine herself brave enough to actually catch something in it.

When the lights go down and movie starts, Nancy settles into her seat, putting the ticket stub into the cupholder. The theater is crowded, mostly full of twittering teenagers, all clearly enjoying the idea of being scared for the next ninety-minutes. Nancy wants to tell them that being terrified really isn't all it's cracked up to be, though in a way she envies them and how the most terrifying thing they can imagine comes from a movie screen.

It's strange, Nancy thinks, to feel nostalgic in a movie that seems to scare and entertain everyone else. But she does feel that way, feels an odd yearning for a place, for a time, that she doesn't really miss at all.

The lead character is equally as familiar, a smart but mousy teenage girl who finds herself in over her head after her best friend disappears one night and strange things start happening in her small town. Nancy recognizes herself easily in the girl with two kid siblings, a popular jock boyfriend, and the missing best friend. She recognizes Jonathan too in the loner character who somehow finds himself helping the protagonist face down the monsters in the third act of the movie.

Nancy doesn't mind that she's the only person in the theater that laughs when the plucky teenagers buy a bear trap and inform the miffed clerk that they're about to go monster hunting. And she's pretty sure that she's the only person in the darkened room with tears

in her eyes when the heroine rescues her best friend from the monsters who drug her down to a hellish underground world. She sits there as the lights come up, wiping her eyes with the heel of her hand and feeling a sharp pain in her chest, something she hasn't felt since the door closed behind Jonathan that last time and she realized that she was really alone in the apartment they'd had together for two years. Suddenly she misses everything about being a kid with a powerful heaviness that tastes sharp and bitter in her mouth.

It comes as no surprise when she sees Jonathan's name listed as the writer of the movie and director of the film. Nancy feels an odd sort of pride as she listens to the people talk about the movie on their way past her, giggling and holding onto each other as they remember the scary moments.

When Nancy gets home, she calls Steve because she isn't sure how to bring herself to call the person she actually wants to call. She can hear the baby in the background, his son, only a few months old but Nancy is certain that he already has enough attitude to keep his father running around. "Have you seen Jonathan's movie?" She asks when she's done laughing at Steve's stories about the baby.

Steve scoffs. "Yes, Nancy, of course," he says drily, "I have all the time in the world to go to the movie theater and watch a horror movie."

Nancy rolls her eyes. "Stupid question," she acknowledges. "You should see it. You're in it."

"I'm flattered," Steve tells her. "Am I cool?"

"The coolest," Nancy assures him.

A pause and then, "Have you talked to Jonathan?" Steve gives her only a beat to not answer his question. "I'm guessing you're calling me to avoid calling him."

"I'm not!" Nancy protests too vehemently to be truthful. "I was checking in. Checking up on Milo."

Steve laughs and Nancy can picture him shaking his head, running a hand through his hair. "Oh, Nance," he says affectionately, "you'll

never change."

When she hangs up with Steve, Nancy takes a deep breath and calls Joyce. She has the number memorized, learned years and years before. Joyce, like Nancy's own family, had chosen to stay in Hawkins, something that never quite made sense to her. But she's stopped trying to understand the thought-process of her parents and people their age a long time ago.

Nancy couldn't wait to be anything other than the girl from Hawkins, something her parents have never understood.

Joyce answers on the second ring and repeats her name with a breathless excitement, the way she always does whenever Nancy calls. Which is, she thinks with a twinge of guilt, not often.

"Hi Mrs. Byers," Nancy says, leaning against the wall in the kitchen, "how are you?"

As Joyce answers her question, Nancy thinks about the woman and how, for a while, she saw her almost daily. She remembers how it had felt to have Joyce hug her, how she always held on with a twinge of desperation even years later, after Will and Jonathan were both safe and grown. How she always smelled unlike any other mother Nancy ever knew -sharp rather than floral- how she would press her face to the softness of Joyce's shoulder and neck and inhale and hope that the woman didn't notice. She'd spent holidays and birthdays at the Byers' household, so much time pretending with the rest of them that it didn't make her want to panic, being there.

Once, after going to the Byers house to celebrate Will's birthday, Nancy had woken in the middle of the night with a scream in her throat and her fingers clawing at the blankets around her. Jonathan had pulled her close, kissed her face, petted her hair, and held her tight against him. "We don't have to visit anymore," he'd whispered to her and they'd never brought it up again but had also never gone back to the house.

Nancy pushes the thoughts aside, swallowing. "I'm fine, Mrs. Byers," she answers the question that her mind somehow managed to pick up on. "I was...I was actually calling to see if..." She swallows again. "If I



could get Jonathan's number from you."

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He says her name like he's been expecting her to call.

Nancy is sitting on the kitchen floor, the cord stretched tight between the wall and her ear, her back to the wall like she's bracing herself against the conversation. Against the sensation of hearing his voice again for the first time in years.

"Hey Nancy," he says like it's been a day instead of years, like he never forgot how to say her name with the sort of familiarity that she grew used to.

She remembers the sound of him whispering her name in the dark when he had to soothe her wild mind in the middle of the night. She remembers the sound of him forcing her name out between clenched teeth, his own mind wild and miles and years away. She remembers the sound of him saying her name, desperate and reverent as he moved inside her, as she held onto his back, as she pressed her lips to his neck and shoulders. She remembers the sound of her name leaving his mouth like a laugh, like a sentence all its own, like sometimes he still wondered at being able to say it at all.

Nancy wonders if Jonathan remembers those things too, or if when she says, "Jonathan," it brings up similar memories for him.

The silence between them stretches miles. It's a long-distance call and Nancy can almost feel it, all that space crackling between them on the phoneline. Suddenly she isn't sure what she wants to say to him, isn't sure that she can put it into words. Isn't sure why she called him at all.

"How have you been?" Jonathan says finally, and it seems so simple, so easy to ask such a question. Like she can't believe she didn't think about it herself.

Nancy swallows. "I saw your movie," she tells him, rather than answering the question directly. "Today, actually."

A pause and then a sound that might almost be a chuckle, soft and slightly embarrassed. "Did you like it?"

"Yes," Nancy tells him, "but probably not for the same reasons that everyone else did."

Jonathan hums, a pleased sort of sound. "I hope you didn't mind," he tells her, sounding almost afraid that she might tell him that she did, in fact, mind. "I talked to Will about it when I was working on the screenplay and Mike but I..." Nancy waits for him to finish that sentence. "I didn't have your number," Jonathan says, and she feels almost disappointed at the lie.

"I didn't mind," Nancy assures him. "I...I liked the ending. That it had a happy ending."

She means for the heroine and her rescued friend. She means for the misfit boy that gets to kiss the girl in the final scene.

After a moment, Nancy finds her courage and says, "You're in California now?"

"Yeah," Jonathan tells her. "The studio is out here and they want me to make another movie. I've been trying to come up with an idea."

Nancy smiles, pressing the phone closer to her ear, as though that might bring his voice closer, might erase some of the hum of the miles. "I'm sure you won't have any shortage of ideas."

Jonathan ignores the comment. "You're in New York City?" When she tells him that she is, trying to ignore the fact that they are on completely opposite sides of the country which seems somehow fitting and tragic at the same time, he says, "I'll be there next week. To do interviews and press for the movie."

Nancy swallows and she can feel the same sensation she felt at the end of the movie, that heavy and metallic sharpness. The bite of longing. "Okay," she says softly and that seems to be enough.

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They don't talk between that night and the afternoon they agree to meet up in the coffee shop on Nancy's street. Jonathan is already there when she walks in, sitting at a table, and when he sees her he stands up so fast that the chair nearly clatters to the floor. In person, he looks even more like she remembers him, like the person in her mind. Not twenty-two anymore, no longer shaggy-haired with big hands and big feet and broad shoulders and very little idea of how to inhabit the world with them. But still Jonathan. Even the camera, an older model than the ones that are popular now, sitting in one of the empty seats beside him lends to the feeling that she's somehow stepped back in time.

Nancy wonders what she looks like to him, if she's still that angular and sharp girl he fell in love with when she imagined herself too insufferable and caustic to really catch anyone's eye. Steve had loved her when she was shy, mousy, bookish. Jonathan had loved her then and after and always.

They stare at each other and Nancy wants to hug him but doesn't, certain that if she steps any closer she'll be stuck again, a satellite in orbit. She's her own planet, uncertain if she wants to be sucked into the gravitational pull of someone else.

"Let me get you coffee," Jonathan says and if he's disappointed by their reunion he doesn't show it.

Nancy just nods, sitting down at the table, watching as he goes to the counter. The two baristas behind the counter recognize him, grinning and wide-eyed, hurriedly talking over one another to tell him how much they loved his movie and how they've seen him on TV. As Nancy watches, she sees even more of the old Jonathan, the one that she knew, the quietness to him as he smiles and nods and gently let them drown him in their words. She knows how those girls feel, how it feels to have Jonathan Byers listen to what you have to say -good, bad, stupid or angry, it never made a difference. She knows the quiet gentleness of him, how he always held her carefully but never like he feared she might break.

One of the girls says, "I *loved* Emily! She was so cool and badass!" and Jonathan smiles, nodding as he glances over his shoulder and looks at Nancy sitting there, waiting for him. He takes the coffees and sits

across from her and Nancy holds onto the cup even though it's warm inside the shop and her blood is racing and it makes her feel small and tight in her skin.

"How long are you here for?" Nancy asks and tries not to feel disappointed when he tells her that he'll be gone by the weekend, only a few days away. "I'm sure it's all a whirlwind, having to do all these interviews and all this traveling. But exciting, too."

Jonathan nods, shrugs one shoulder. "It's hard to believe."

"Not for me," Nancy tells him. "You were always messing around with Bob's camera and then whatever newer ones they came out with." She scoffs. "I'm sure there are probably dozens of stupid videos of me out there."

"Those aren't stupid," Jonathan assures her. "They're important documents in the life of Nancy Wheeler."

Nancy rolls her eyes at him. "I'm sure the world will want to know how our apartment looked and about my twenty-first birthday." She grimaces. "Actually...maybe we should destroy that tape."

Jonathan laughs and Nancy smiles, biting the inside of her cheek to keep from turning it into a grin. "I think you're safe," he assures her. "Might keep the apartment one, though. I miss that place."

She nods before she can stop herself. "Yeah," Nancy says but manages to keep from pointing out that it wasn't the same without him there. She moved out a few months later when the lease ran up.

From there, they make small talk: about his movie and how Joyce still hasn't seen it even though she tells him daily how proud she is when people talk about it. "She says it's too scary," Jonathan says with a shrug. "But she wants me to make another one and put Bob in it."

Nancy nods. "You should," she tells him. She met the man only once when they went into his store to get the recorder they used to take down the lab back in Hawkins but she'll be forever grateful to him for saving Mike and the others.

"I guess there's really no shortage of things to write about," Jonathan says. "I could write movies for the next fifteen years."

"Do people ever ask you where the ideas come from?"

Jonathan waves his hand in a from-time-to-time type gesture. "I just make something up," he tells her. "People would never believe any of it could be true, anyway."

They talk about her job, hardly as interesting as his -Nancy's words, not Jonathan's. She sees pride in his eyes but not surprise when she tells him that she's the head of her department. He only nods like he'd known such a thing was inevitable.

They finish their coffee, linger only long enough to ascertain that neither of them have anywhere else they need to be. It's easy for Nancy to designate herself as tour-guide, to use that excuse to stay with Jonathan, rather than to admit that she's not ready to out of his company. His orbit.

"You like it here?" Jonathan asks and Nancy mimics his hand waggle from earlier, the from-time-to-time gesture that she feels encapsulates her feelings about the city. "Do you ever go back to Hawkins?"

"Only when I have to," Nancy admits. "I never really thought about leaving until everything started happening with Will and Barb. It's weird...I always thought I was going to be like my mom, have a house and a husband and some kids and just stay there in Hawkins forever. Then I started to hate that place so much all I ever thought about was getting the hell out of there."

Jonathan nods. They're walking nearly shoulder-to-shoulder down the sidewalk, coats pulled tight against the bite in the air. "I always wanted to leave," he tells her and it's hardly a secret between them. "I just never wanted to leave my mom, or Will. I still hate thinking about her there, alone."

"She has the Chief," Nancy points out, though Hopper isn't the Chief anymore and hasn't been for years. "I think they do okay."

But still, Nancy can see the guilt in Jonathan that she never felt in

herself. Their college, their small apartment, hadn't been too far from Hawkins -far enough that it felt like freedom but close enough that they could visit home, could check on their brothers and on Joyce.

"California is a long way from Hawkins," Nancy points out.

Jonathan looks at her. "So is New York City."

Once again she thinks about the irony of the fact that they're on opposite sides of the country. It seems perfectly fitting for two people who apparently never learned how to compromise.

It'll be Christmas soon and everywhere are little reminders of this: the lights, the window decorations, the men and women in Salvation Army red ringing their bells dutifully and calling out hearty ho-ho-hos to the children who drop change into their buckets. Nancy stuffs her hands into her pockets because it seems like she could all too easily reach for Jonathan's instead. "I like it like this most of all," Nancy tells him, pointing to the decorations and the décor. "I know it's mostly capitalist nonsense," she makes a face at herself and the words, "but I think it's pretty."

"It is pretty," Jonathan says, his eyes on the brightly colored lights strung in front of the barred windows of a barber shop. "It's kind of like home."

Nancy nods, though she's never thought about the lights and decorations and snow as something that reminded her of Hawkins. Jonathan reminds her of home, though not necessarily of the place where they grew up.

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The day passes quickly, time slipping by hour by hour until it's evening and Nancy has no idea how such a thing happened. It's winter so the night sneaks on suddenly but even still it catches her by surprise, the fact that she hadn't once thought to glance at her watch. Not that it matters; there's nowhere she needs to be, no one she needs to answer to.

It's been easy, this tour-guide persona. Easy to be with Jonathan, to show him around, to drag him from place to place and point out the things that she finds interesting or the little things that matter only to her and her time here. It's easy to stand by and let him take pictures, to teasingly point out other things he should photograph, to make faces at his lens whenever its pointed in her direction. It's easy to reach for his elbow, to tug him toward something noteworthy. He follows dutifully in typical Jonathan fashion, smiling in a way that makes it seem like he hasn't done it recently, not sincerely anyway. So often she's walked these streets by herself, moving from one place to the next, hardly pausing to take it all in anymore. The last time she did any real sight-seeing was when she was with Mike and Eleven and they gave her a reason to laugh and joke around and gesture grandly at building and historic sites. It's nice to be with someone else.

Though, if Nancy were truly being honest with herself, she would have to admit that it's nice being with Jonathan.

They eat in a hole-in-the-wall Greek place that her roommate introduced her to a few months ago and Jonathan pays for their food and Nancy wraps her arms around herself and leans back in the padded seat of the booth and inhales slowly through her nose, taking it all in as she watches Jonathan talk to the waiter. She feels heavy and warm inside, her bones languid and loose in her body. She feels...happy. Happier than she can remember feeling in a while.

Nancy thinks that might not be totally fair. She's happy most of the time. She loves her apartment and her cat that comes and goes as he pleases and her job and the fact that everyone calls her the boss and that she lives in this city that is always loud and busy and never, ever dark.

What she feels now is different than happiness. What she feels now is contentedness. And that's something she hasn't felt in a long time.

When they go to leave, Jonathan offers her his hand without thinking and Nancy takes it because she wants to. It's colder outside than it has been all day and Nancy can see her breath crystalizing in front of her, brief plumes that disappear almost as soon as she exhales. "I bet it's not cold like this in California."

"It gets cold," Jonathan tells her and then relents, "But not like this."

Nancy feels brave and just a little bit stupid when she looks at Jonathan and says, "My place is only two blocks from here. We could warm up."

It sounds like a proposition, even to her, and she rolls her eyes at herself, smiling when Jonathan laughs. But still, Jonathan nods. "Okay, sure."

She unlocks the door and lets them in and the apartment is quiet and still and Nancy wonders, not for the first time, where her roommate disappears to at all hours of the night. It's nice, in a way, to feel like she's living alone but not having to pay the rent all by herself. The apartment is cold because of the cracked window and Nancy rubs her arms through her jacket, going into the kitchen and closing the window once she ascertains the cat's presence. "Do you want something to drink?" She calls over her shoulder. "Beer? Water? Coffee?"

"Coffee," Jonathan says, "since we're supposed to be warming up." There's a teasing edge to his voice and it makes her smile and roll her eyes as she starts the pot.

Jonathan is standing in the living room, hands stuck into the pockets of his jacket as he studies the CDs stacked on the shelves of her roommate's entertainment center. "I might be the only person who still uses a Walkman," he remarks.

"You probably are," Nancy remarks. "But somehow that doesn't surprise me. I mean you are still carrying this thing around." She points to Jonathan's camera, set down now on the coffee table. "You know a lot of cameras these days have memory cards now."

Jonathan dismisses the idea with a shake of his head. "And get rid of film? No thank you."

"Jonathan Byers you haven't changed a bit," Nancy remarks.

"That's a little disappointing," Jonathan mutters and Nancy looks at him, brow furrowed. "I thought you would be impressed now that I



was a bigshot movie director."

Nancy snorts out a laugh and then pauses, looking at him closely. "You're serious."

Jonathan shrugs, looking at his feet instead of at her. "You're a hard person to impress, Nancy Wheeler."

"Why do you even have to impress me?" Nancy asks, stepping closer to him. "I've known you my whole life."

"Maybe that's the problem," Jonathan says softly. "Maybe that's why things never work out between us."

Nancy puts a hand against his cheek, lifting his face toward hers. The scar on her hand itches, the way it always seems to do around him and she ignores it in favor of the cool press of his skin against hers. "Is that what you think?"

Jonathan counters her question with one of his own, "What do you think? Why has it been four years since we've seen each other?"

"Because we were young and stupid," Nancy says, "and stubborn. And..."

Nancy thinks about that night, the moment years ago when it suddenly clicked into her head that she couldn't do this anymore. When she saw herself becoming like her mother anyway. When she wondered if Jonathan loved her because she was there and because of what they had been through together.

"I was afraid," Nancy tells him softly, "even then. Afraid of all of this. Of not being able to grow with you there. Of being stuck like that forever."

Jonathan takes her hand away from his face, holds both of her hands in his, and she can feel the heat of him, so impossibly close. It makes her feel dizzy and blindly hot and off balance. "I thought..." The words seem to stick in her throat, to the dry roof of her mouth. "I thought you might never look at me and see anything other than Hawkins and what happened there."

Sometimes she had been certain that the nightmares, the memories, were a result of their proximity, that shared trauma that had seemed to bring them together in the first place.

"Nancy." Jonathan says her name the way he used to, hoarse in the quiet of the room, disbelieving. He looks at her and she wonders what he sees: that prickly, angry girl from Hawkins or the Nancy that everyone else knows. Confident and in control, normal and unordinary.

She isn't sure which version she wants to be.

For a minute, she thinks that she might want to be both.

Jonathan pulls her close enough to kiss but hesitates, leaving that final bit of space between them for her. Nancy swallows and lifts her face toward his, pressing their lips together. It feels familiar and easy, the way it always felt to kiss him, like she'd been doing it for her whole life instead of just a small snatch of time.

She's had other boyfriends since Jonathan, people she's met in New York, men she's dated sporadically and with little real interest. Men who didn't know her as Nancy from Hawkins, who hadn't been there with her throughout the countless times that she thought she might die, that her inability to act or a wrong choice on her part might cause someone she loved to die instead. Men she fell asleep next to who didn't know what to do if she woke up breathing heavily and sweating, who didn't understand that her nightmares were more like memories. Once she had thought that was a good thing, a way to reinvent herself, to be someone different.

Now, she's not so sure.

Nancy puts her hand around Jonathan's neck, deepening the kiss, trying to remember the last time she kissed him all those years ago. The morning before the end, how he was running late to class and still stopped, kissing her quickly before he could leave. He'd had no idea then about the thought that had taken root in her mind, how she had decided with a terrifying finality *I don't want to be this girl anymore.*

Nancy pulls away from him and Jonathan looks at her, breathless and surprised, hurt and elated all at once. "It wasn't your fault," she tells him quickly, breathless herself and suddenly eager to get the words out, to say what she never had said that night or the ones that came after. "I was afraid, and I wanted to be different. I wanted...to be someone else."

Jonathan nods, steps back. "I understand," he tells her. "It's not your fault either. I know what it's like to want to forget about everything."

"But I can't." Nancy steps toward him, erasing that distance again. "I don't want to forget about any of it. About you."

She kisses him again and Jonathan's hands settle around her waist, pressing their bodies together. She'd left Hawkins but taken Jonathan with her and hadn't felt at all like she'd left her home behind her. She'd left Indianapolis for New York alone and had always felt oddly out of place, disjointed in this big city. It hadn't felt like home until...until...

Nancy kisses him, breathing Jonathan in, savoring the feeling of his hands on her once more, of the comforting press of his body against hers. Until now, she thinks. This place hasn't felt like home until now.

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Nancy wakes up to the sound of someone moving in bed beside her. Jonathan. She feigns sleep, hiding her smile in her pillow, listening as Jonathan gets out of bed, heading out of the bedroom and down the hallway toward the bathroom. She's surprised to hear the low murmur of his voice, the exchange of conversation that means her roommate is home and she thinks briefly about getting up, explaining his presence, saving him from awkward conversation. But the sheets are still warm with him and getting up honestly holds no appeal, so Nancy stays tucked into the blankets, pretending to still be asleep.

Jonathan returns, easing the door closed behind him once more. He gets into bed and his arms slid around her immediately, softly so as not to wake her. The press of his chest against her back, the warmth of his body around hers, feels familiar and safe and Nancy opens her

eyes finally, turning her head to look at him.

"Good morning," Jonathan says quietly, brushing the hair away from her face and what Nancy wants to say in that moment is *I love you and I never stopped*.

She doesn't but the feeling settles in her chest anyway, a delicious weight. A certainty that she doesn't mind.

Instead, Nancy just says, "Good morning" back and smiles and thinks that this is exactly who she wants to be after all.